

6. German Evangelicals and Swiss Reformed Seek Zion in the Southeast

The Southern U.S., for the most part, was in the 19th century most unlike much of the rest of the country in that it was not considered hospitable to non-English-speaking immigrants. Other than in a few large cities, most surnames were decidedly of Anglo-Saxon origin, as were the churches they attended, descendants of the Great Awakenings that took place within the confines of English-derived Puritanism. But here and there, one could find exceptions. Among them were two German-speaking immigrant groups that birthed the four congregations of the Evangelical and Reformed tradition in Alabama and Tennessee. They started out in Bavaria and Switzerland, respectively, but brought their language, customs and religion with them to the new land.

The settlers of Cullman, Alabama in 1874 and Gruetli, Tennessee in 1869 were seeking, like most settlers did in their time, more fertile land and more political and economic freedom than Europe would or could grant. In the case of Swiss emigrants to the hard, rocky soil of southeastern Tennessee, they had been hoodwinked by a fellow immigrant who had become the mayor of Knoxville.¹ The arrivals would have to make the best of a most disillusioning situation, made especially so by promises made in promotional materials of lush, green pastures.

The Swiss were practitioners of the Reformed faith, a compound of Calvinism and the peculiar (and, for his day and time, radical) teachings of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), such as a conception of the Lord's Supper and Baptism as having no special saving functions, as Lutherans and Catholics by contrast taught. This meant that in Reformed thought, a believer, for instance, was not automatically (i.e., mechanically) regenerated spiritually by God simply because he or she underwent baptism (whether as a child or an adult), and the physical body of Christ was not present in the elements of Holy Communion, only a spiritual bond between Christ (understood to be localized in heaven) and the believer. Because Swiss Protestants, mostly German speakers, were so few and geographically dispersed in the U.S., making a distinctly Swiss Reformed denomination impractical, in the main, they joined the similar German Reformed tradition, which, like the church they had known in their homeland, honored the Heidelberg Catechism, developed in the Palatinate region of what is today southwestern Germany in 1563. Although the distinctively Swiss Helvetic Confessions were not officially recognized, they may have been taught anyway in the early years by Swiss-educated pastors. By the turn of the 20th century, the denomination was known as the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS); it

was governed by a system similar to that of American and British Presbyterianism, with elders, both pastors and laymen, and deacons forming boards called “consistories” setting policies for congregations (roughly the equivalent of sessions in a Presbyterian church), and elders, ordained and lay, serving on a parity with each other in higher church courts, the decisions of which were binding on bodies underneath them.

Dissension, instigated in all likelihood by the liberation people felt from traditional European clerical control in a new country, prevented the Reformed Church from taking root in Gruetli (Episcopalians would find the Swiss more congenial in later decades and formed a parish largely with their descendants, now closed).² But a number of them, along with some German-Americans who originally settled in the Great Plains but were seeking a warmer climate, traveled some 40-50 miles to the southwest to a place about 10 miles north of the Alabama border, called Belvidere. The mainly flat land, with only gently rolling hills, was far more suitable for large-scale agriculture than the mountain country was, and it was there that an enduring Reformed church, one known today as First United Church, UCC, was established in 1873, with names such as Stalder, Maurer, Glaus, Zulliger, Zaugg, Roggli, and Kasserman in the original membership.³ Certain other of the Gruetli Swiss eventually made their way to the Nashville area, where lush dairying land in particular was abundant. Those people eventually met with the Rev. Johannes or Jacob “John” von Gruenigen (1849-1907; accounts of his first name differ), a German-speaking Swiss Reformed pastor, who organized a church with them, First Reformed, in 1891.⁴ Both churches began the process of language and cultural assimilation well in advance of their Northern co-religionists, who often deferred the process until the hand of anti-German sentiment during World War I forced the change to English-language services and activities.

As for Alabama, a progressive-minded military colonel who professed Protestantism in a staunchly Catholic place that Bavaria (modern-day southern Germany) was, Johann G. Cullmann (1823-1895), led a group of several families from the overcrowded German-American enclave of Cincinnati to an isolated place in the rolling hills of the north central part of the state, along the Louisville and Nashville Railroad.⁵

The settlers were mainly of the Evangelical (sometimes termed “Unionist,” often by conservative Lutheran detractors) persuasion, which was the state church of several German principalities that combined elements of Lutheran and Reformed doctrine into a synthesis that emphasized piety, good works, and a staunch devotion to worship and education. On matters where Lutheran and Reformed confessions

disagreed with each other, believers and clergy were generally free to choose between the two, provided that sound Scriptural interpretation was used to make the decision. Those confessions, along with the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, were the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran), Luther's Small Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism (Reformed), and the Evangelical Catechism, the latter formulated in America for the ESNA to use in instructing youth to prepare for the rite of confirmation.

"Evangelical," unlike its contemporary American usage to refer to theologically and socially conservative revivalistic and/or fundamentalist churches and denominations, was basically a synonym for "Protestant" in its German rendition and was the name Martin Luther (1483-1546) intended for the tradition that became named after him instead by his Catholic opponents. It originated in Prussia (modern-day northeastern Germany) in 1817 when that principality's king decided to partially centralize Protestant bodies in his land for administrative reasons, as well as from his personal preferences. Immigrants from Prussia and other German states brought the faith to the Missouri and Mississippi valleys by the mid-19th century, where it spread primarily in the northern central U.S., first mostly to farm settlements, then eventually to larger cities. By 1927, after the consolidation of several regional groups in the 1870s, the denomination took the name Evangelical Synod of North America (ESNA). Pastors in this tradition tended to have more unilateral power over churches than did those in the Reformed tradition, especially on matters of worship and education, but usually ESNA churches had a council (which, according to local custom, might or might not employ the elder-and-deacon system) to handle temporal affairs.

Thus, the St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church (originally identifying as a vague Lutheranism) was created in 1874 to meet the spiritual needs of the immigrants in a place that was otherwise Anglophone and revivalistic, something largely repellent to German sensibilities. Dissension did take place in later years, bringing about two different Lutheran "children" churches, though, one of the hardline Missouri Synod and the other belonging to the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), a moderate group that was then the dominant expression of the tradition in the Southeastern U.S.⁶ St. John's Church actually operated independently, as did many from Unionist/Evangelical background for decades after establishment, with an assortment of Lutheran and ESNA pastors, until the 1920s, when it formally joined the ESNA.

In a separate but somewhat related development in 1898, some German immigrants in Birmingham founded the German Evangelical Freidens Gemeinde, later known as St. John's Evangelical Church. Names like Klebs, Behrens, Schaefer, Steck, Puls,

Bude, and Denker were on the rolls of the fledgling congregation, located as it was in a place known for more exotic ethnicities such as Italian and Greek, and even Russian, than German.⁷ Unlike the Cullman church, the Birmingham congregation belonged to the ESNA from the beginning. Almost all its early male members were probably workers in that city's iron, steel, coal, and pipe industries. Some people from the Cullman church may have moved to Birmingham to work there and joined St. John's; the two churches became very close beginning in the early 20th century, separated by only about 55 miles.

All four of the congregations were strongly family-oriented by modern standards and considered themselves conservative in the literal sense of preserving traditional European Protestantism in the face of potential assaults from free thinking on the one hand (a particular *bête noire* for the Evangelical tradition) and emotion-based fervor on the other. All greatly honored their pastors, who were supposed to be educated—and educators, particularly of the young for the generations-old rite of confirmation at the “age of accountability,” roughly 12 to 14. As the Evangelicals and the Reformed in the American scene began to very closely resemble each other in terms of worship, piety, theology, and mission, they looked toward organizational union. This happened in 1934, with the Tennessee churches coming from the Kentucky Classis (presbytery) of the RCUS (centered in the Louisville area) and the Alabama churches coming from the Southern District (largely centered in New Orleans) of the ESNA into the South Indiana Synod of the new Evangelical and Reformed Church (E&R) several years later. As the name suggests, the bulk of the churches were in that state, and as the president of that synod recognized, “Situated on a north-south line approximately 432 miles from Louisville, it was necessary in past years for delegates to travel by train to that city in order to meet with their brethren. It was practically impossible for many to do this.”⁸ In 1952, this was remedied by the establishment of an Alabama-Tennessee section of the Synod for fellowship purposes, with each congregation taking turns hosting gatherings.

By the 1950s, all were experiencing their share of the resurgence in American religion, with what was then First E&R Church in Nashville able to move to the upscale Green Hills neighborhood, leaving behind an outmoded building in a part of town where few of its members resided in the first place (a few people were still farmers who had to commute to church in the city every Sunday). The new edifice was in fact designed by an architect member of the church, himself of Swiss ancestry, John Suter. The other churches, meanwhile, enhanced their physical facilities and programs to meet the needs of growing families. As the proceedings gained momentum for yet another merger, this time into what would become the UCC, there were predictable apprehensions in each of the four congregations. With the

necessary geographical realignment that would come would come also potential fellowship with churches not of their peculiar temperament, activism-minded liberal Congregational churches on the one hand and revival-minded “Congregational Christian” ones on the other. To make matters more anxious still, each faction within the Southeast Convention was debating the desirability of integrating itself to make the UCC in the South bi-racial. E&R attitudes toward joining the Convention to become the Southeast Conference ran the gamut from enthusiastic support to determined opposition, although the evidence is mainly anecdotal, with no records of organized caucuses or the like. Unlike other parts of the country, controversial attention was focused upon the race issue, meaning that the E&R churches got somewhat lost in the shuffle and may not have gotten the proper attention from national, South Indiana Synod (which became the Indiana-Kentucky Conference of the UCC in 1963) and Southeast Convention officials that their co-religionists in Northern states would have from their respective CC conferences and E&R synods.

Whether they wanted it or not, the E&R churches had no recourse but to go along, since their national constitution and bylaws did not at the time permit unilateral congregational withdrawal as did the Congregational Christian tradition. And the UCC would bring changes aplenty to each congregation, as did the times in which the merger occurred, with many long-established aspects of American life and Protestant faith under challenge from newer, more liberation-minded ideas. By and large, only First Church in Belvidere remained relatively unscathed by the turbulence. The other churches, in various ways conditioned by their past histories, reacted largely negatively to the denomination at large’s embrace of new-fangled notions about worship, doctrine, and scope of mission activity.

In 1968, after several short-lived pastorates by men of Evangelical Synod background from the Midwestern U.S., St. John’s UCC in Cullman, Alabama called the Rev. George Fidler, from the North Carolina Reformed tradition, to its pulpit, his first and only pastorate outside his native state. The Southern Synod, the successor to the old North Carolina Classis of the RCUS, represented a rather distinct subculture of the E&R Church, where revivals were not uncommon and there was nowhere as much concern for liturgy and the sacraments as there was in parts of the Mid-Atlantic region, where the “Mercersburg Movement” held sway during the late 19th century. He brought his preferences to help refresh a church that had been stagnating from cultural inbreeding, and it paid results in large increases of membership during the 1970s, with St. John’s becoming the largest congregation in the entire Southeast Conference for 25 years. But, of course, it came with a price, as Fidler began vocally criticizing the rest of the denomination for not holding to his traditionalist interpretation of scripture and engaging in what he considered advocacy for causes

contrary to the beliefs of most all his membership. By the latter part of his nearly quarter-century pastorate, he simply dropped out of UCC life and governed the church as if it were independent. Even though Fidler was said by some observers to rule St. John's Church with an iron hand of sorts, he was not able to forestall schisms prompted by two different associate pastors who worked under him in the late 1980s and early 1990s, who went on to establish, respectively, a non-denominational fundamentalist congregation and the entry into the town's religious scene of the arch-conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Disgruntled St. John's members, upset at the UCC as much as they were at Fidler for not allowing his associates free rein to express their ultra-conservative doctrinal views (well to the right of Fidler, according to reports), were the core groups of those two churches. Some of them also leveled charges of abuse of power and immoral behavior against the St. John's pastor, although none of those accusations were ever substantiated. After Fidler's retirement in 1992, an interim pastor who followed him was, for all intents and purposes, run out of town when he attempted to relate St. John's Church more closely to the UCC, specifically by experimenting with substituting the UCC Statement of Faith to the congregation's Sunday worship in place of the Apostles' Creed, a move that angered both longtime and more recent members alike who were accustomed to Fidler's traditionalism.

Meanwhile, to the south, in 1960, Birmingham's St. John's Church called an openly fundamentalist pastor (a graduate of South Carolina's Bob Jones University who somehow obtained ordination in the E&R Church) to its pulpit, Evansville, Indiana native George Hewson. Despite showing some initial leadership in the SEC transition (he was the first Moderator of the provisional Alabama-Tennessee E&R group, beginning in 1964), he decided by the end of the decade he had had enough of the UCC's liberal ethos (also, his laypeople were likely put off in particular by the denomination's work in the Civil Rights movement), and encouraged his parish to withdraw from the UCC. The St. John's Church members honored his wishes, becoming independent in 1969 in fact, not just in practice. The then non-denominational congregation (Hewson retired in 1981) in the 1990s relocated to suburban Shelby County (in the vicinity of the fast-developing U.S. Highway 280 corridor) to make way for a construction project by a neighboring hospital in the city's Southside section and took a different name; in the late 2010s, a much reduced membership sold that building and returned to the city in what amounted to a last-ditch attempt to appeal to a younger demographic. Unfortunately, it appears that the church closed sometime around 2020, probably due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, ending a 122-year history.

With two nearby neighbors, Nashville's First E&R Church cautiously participated in inter-church gatherings with Brookmeade Congregational and Howard Congregational churches, with some people joining in enthusiastically and others not at all. But, on the whole, the congregation seldom was comfortable with the UCC or the Conference, despite its generous support of OCWM until 2005. In the early 1960s, at least one member of the church's consistory petitioned the Indiana-Kentucky Conference for First Church to receive an exemption from conference realignment, or else it would consider independence; by the time the Rev. John Roemer came to the pastorate in 1964, the movement died out, probably due to the congregation's decades-old practice of giving utmost respect to a pastor's position on issues, whether individual members agreed with him or not. As time moved on, though, and two later pastors came and went, things moved in a more independent, conservative-minded direction when, in 1987, a former television sportscaster who was ordained to and served briefly in the UCC ministry in the late 1960s, the Rev. Robert Kurtz, assumed the pulpit. Kurtz, a Nebraska native who was reared in the German Congregational tradition (despite its name, it more closely resembled the Evangelical Synod, but with a greater stress on devotional practices and Biblical literalism and a corresponding lessening of Reformation influences), led the Nashville congregation for several years (during which it celebrated its centennial in 1991) when he was called by the Cullman church, of all places, to succeed Fidler, whose two-and-a-half-decade pastorate had ended on a sour note for him and the church alike after years of near-incessant conflicts there.

Initially, Bob Kurtz sought to do what the interim who followed Fidler could not accomplish, namely encouraging the membership to become more active in UCC affairs on the Alabama-Tennessee Association and Conference levels. However, even after more people started participating as delegates and committee members, he and his lay leadership became as alienated as Fidler had been over the denomination's (and increasingly the Conference's and Association's) progressive stances on sexuality, Biblical interpretation and a concomitant low regard for strict doctrine, patriotism, and a host of other "culture war" issues. Given the town's insular nature that was utterly antipathetic to urban mores, it was almost inevitable. Several years into his pastorate, his and his congregation's relationship to the UCC began deteriorating, when he realized that neither he nor the St. John's Church leadership could significantly influence policies outside the congregation—the same thing that marked Fidler's 24-year tenure. Working with a similarly-disaffected ESNA-heritage church in New Braunfels, Texas (close to San Antonio, where he once worked in television), Kurtz and St. John's officials laid the groundwork in the late 1990s for the new Evangelical Association of Reformed and Congregational Christian Churches (EA), a conservative alternative to the UCC for mainly E&R-heritage congregations.

Such a large gulf had arisen between St. John's and UCC entities that the SEC rescinded its acceptance of an offer by the congregation to host the 1999 Annual Conference Meeting, which was to have been part of the commemoration of the church's 125th anniversary that year. The incident that proved that the church's relationship to UCC bodies was beyond repair, though, was a 2001 ordination of one of its members by the EA (a man who some years later became St. John's pastor after Kurtz retired) to a school chaplaincy in Louisiana, which neither the Association nor the Conference were even made aware of, let alone invited to participate in, until some time after the fact; that action was probably a revenge of sorts for the SEC snubbing St. John's some three years earlier. By 2002, the Cullman congregation changed its constitution and bylaws to remove its relationship to the UCC, ending a five-year drama once and for all.

St. John's continues today as a basically independent church loosely affiliated to the EA, while Nashville, by then known as First United Church (Evangelical and Reformed) after Kurtz encouraged its renaming in 1988, afterward had a bad experience with a female pastor running headlong into the staunch traditionalism there and opposition to the "Open and Affirming" program among some congregants. The Nashville church discontinued support of OCWM in the mid-2000s, and in the meantime, became predominantly composed of senior citizens, many if not most of them descendants of the founders, unable to maintain the church, or, in some cases, to even attend Sunday School and/or worship. In any case, few if any of Nashville's numerous newer residents were interested in a church that was mostly estranged from its denomination, held to dated customs that only longtime members understood and appreciated, and offered no Sunday School for children. To prevent the Southeast Conference from getting control of its property before an inevitable closing occurred, First United withdrew, after years of deferring the matter, from the UCC in 2016. Not long after, the congregation ceased holding public worship services and its assets were converted into a foundation to provide for the spiritual care of the remaining members and conduct limited mission activity, led by the Rev. Stephen Cottingham, a UMC minister who was the final pastor of First United. The congregation operated for exactly 125 years. The successor foundation is housed presently in a PC(USA) facility in suburban Brentwood, Tennessee. The building on Granny White Pike, meanwhile, was sold to a congregation of the fundamentalist Presbyterian Church in America, one seemingly composed of quite an opposite demographic to that of the latter-day First United: so-called "millennials," people aged roughly from 25 to 45. That church, by contrast, appeared to fill needs that First United Church apparently could (or would) not.

All that left the Belvidere church as the sole remaining Southeast Conference deriving from an Evangelical and Reformed background, unless United Church of Huntsville, Alabama, founded in part with South Indiana Synod and national E&R support, is counted. Strangely, that has occurred despite the church's location in a mostly conservative rural area (except for a prestigious liberal arts college, the University of the South, nearby) and having a significant portion of its membership more concerned about affirming community norms rather than challenging them. But Belvidere has differed from the others substantially. Unlike Birmingham, it has never identified with outright fundamentalism. Unlike Cullman, it has related fairly closely to UCC programs and aims over time, with generous support of OCWM and other non-proselytizing mission work. Unlike Nashville, it did not react with vehemence against women pastors (it has had several in recent years) and was more open to "outsiders" in the larger community, perhaps because of a relative lack of competition in the moderate-to-liberal church market (for lack of a better term) in its immediate area. One other sign of Belvidere's affinity for the UCC from the outset was the fact that it became the first of the four churches to call a Congregational Christian-background pastor to its pulpit, the Rev. Melvin Fenner (1915-2001), in 1965. And it was also ecumenically minded: for some months after Fenner departed, in 1969, students from the Episcopalian seminary at the University of the South filled the pulpit, a highly unusual move given that denomination's historic (although no longer the case) aloofness from other Christian bodies, until a new UCC pastor came later that year. In August 2023, at its annual homecoming celebration, First United Church will observe its 150th anniversary.

In Nashville and Birmingham especially, there were far better-known denominations (mainly Methodism and Presbyterianism) whose churches provided nearly-identical worship styles and theological emphases, making the most plausible reason for people not of German or Swiss ancestry to join the E&R congregations marriage into a family attending them. Cullman did seem for a time to escape the problem, but only due to the innovations brought by George Fidler, as mentioned above, which, in effect, mostly effaced its previous identity, substituting a virtual regard of Holy Scripture as inerrant and popular Southern religious practices for the more moderate theology of the ESNA tradition. The people at Belvidere, by contrast, with their decision to pursue assimilation into rural Tennessee culture at an early date, were more successful than any of the others in preserving a delicate balance between their ethnic origins and meeting the needs of others, with decades of practice long before the UCC came into being. It is further telling that the final remaining SEC church of E&R heritage is the only one of the four that is not located in a municipality, but in the open countryside, where a steeple installed in the late 1980s is a landmark

in the midst of the cattle pastures, corn fields, and patches of hardwood forest of Franklin County, Tennessee.

The only other congregation of the Evangelical and Reformed Church (existing between 1934 and 1957) that had ever been located in the present territory of the Southeast Conference of the UCC was St. John's Church in Atlanta. Founded by 1869 by German-speaking immigrants, it was originally an unaffiliated congregation that professed a liberal (i.e., non-fundamentalist) interpretation of Lutheranism; to this day, the church claims to be the first Lutheran parish ever founded in the city. In 1899, St. John's Church joined the ESNA mainly in order to have access to pastors who spoke German, something probably not readily available at the time in the Lutheran denomination that then encompassed Georgia; the other churches throughout the state had some decades earlier assimilated fully into Southern society and thus spoke English instead.⁹ It was a member of the Southern District of the ESNA (which also included the two Alabama churches; see above) until 1939, when the E&R Church broke up that body and assigned its congregations to several different newly created synods. St. John's Church was assigned to the Southern Synod, which began in May of that year.

Unfortunately, St. John's Church and the Synod proved not to be a good fit for each other, due to several factors. All the congregations of the Synod except for St. John's Church and several churches in Florida (there were none in South Carolina) were from the North Carolina Classis of the RCUS, which, as referred to above, had a very different theological complexion and generation of immigration from Germany than St. John's had. A 1969 history of the congregation opined that the Atlanta church was becoming dissatisfied with the Reformed leanings of the new denomination (and especially the Synod), meaning that the bulk of its membership had probably never accepted fully the ESNA synthesis of Lutheran and Reformed doctrine in the first place.¹⁰ Further, the North Carolina Reformed tradition was decidedly "low" in the degree to which formal liturgy was used in its churches' worship, which was likely in significant contrast to St. John's also. Finally, and probably most importantly, geography played a role in the distant relationship between the Atlanta congregation and the Synod, since the closest E&R church to St. John's was probably located in Charlotte, some 250 miles away, rendering close fellowship with Synod congregations practically impossible except for annual Synod meetings; the construction of the present Interstate 85 between the two cities was not completed until 1967. That fact was similar to the situation with the Alabama and Tennessee churches and the SIS (see chapter 1).

When the last E&R pastor of St. John's Church, the Rev. H. A. Dewald, retired in 1945, the congregation used the resulting vacancy as an opportunity to return to its Lutheran roots (with the rationale for joining the Evangelical tradition made moot by almost all members now speaking English). With the apparent blessing of the Southern Synod, it transferred to the ULCA (see the above reference to a Cullman, Alabama church) that year, joining that denomination's Georgia-Alabama Synod, which then included two other Atlanta congregations for St. John's to hold fellowship with.¹¹ The ULCA was a forerunner of the present Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with which St. John's Lutheran Church, as it is now known, remains affiliated as of 2023. Thus, although the present Southeast Conference constitution acknowledges legally the Southern Synod as one of its founding bodies, the Synod did not actually bring any of its churches into the SEC in 1966.

The outcome of the spiritual and temporal journey of the four E&R-heritage congregations that entered the Southeast Conference over the generations reminds one of the Parable of the Seed and Sower; after all, the seedbed was a new land.

NOTES

1. David E. Clayton, *Forgotten Colony* (n.p.: David E. Clayton, 1971), 3.

2. *Ibid.*, 7-8.

3. *First United Church, United Church of Christ, Belvidere, Tennessee: The 125th Anniversary, 1873-1998*, 2-3.

4. From an unpublished (very) brief history of the congregation.

5. *Centennial of the St. John's United Church, Rev. George A. Fidler, Pastor, Cullman, Alabama* (1974), no pagination.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Golden Jubilee, 1898-1948, St. John's Evangelical and Reformed Church, Birmingham, Alabama, Carl H. Kluge, Pastor*, 2.

8. Paul J. Schlueter, "New Section in South Indiana Synod," in *The Messenger*, February 24, 1953, 29.

9. Louis Jennings Zahn, *History of Saint John's Lutheran Church of Atlanta, Georgia For the Celebration of its Centennial, 1869-1969*, 5-6.

10. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

11. *Ibid.*, 10-11.